

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“As I said yesterday, I thought we might walk down into the village today,” said the Count, taking Natacha's arm as she dismounted from the car. “You can meet some of the villagers and see the church. That is, of course, unless you would rather stay at the Chateau or walk the gardens again. Or we could drive up into the mountains. There are some fine views to be seen.”

“I am more than happy to walk down into the village,” said Natacha demurely.

“And you, Mademoiselle?”

“I am again quite content to follow you,” said Miss Crotchet, looking perplexed and slightly irritated.

“There is something amiss?” he said.

“Miss Crotchet is worried about my having not practised for several days. I really should spend a couple of hours at the piano today.”

“You have not been playing the Broadwood at the chalet? Perhaps you had better spend some time in the Chateau before we go to the village? We could always go this afternoon.”

“I think I would prefer to go to the village this morning and, perhaps, practice this afternoon. Is that all right, Miss Crotchet? I know that you preach work before pleasure, but we are still on holiday. Just this once?”

“Very well,” said Miss Crotchet, somewhat reluctantly.

“I have then to show you a secret,” said the Count. “But first, come into the house and have refreshment with me.”

“You were going to show us a secret, Count,” said Natacha as, half an hour later they emerged into the sunlight once more.

“I was, indeed. Follow me and keep close behind.” He led them across the lawn towards a dense shrubbery. Dutifully the two women followed. “Do not be afraid,” he called over his shoulder. “I know exactly where I am going.”

At the edge of the shrubbery Natacha suddenly felt compelled to halt and look back at the house just as Miss Crotchet came up to her. For a moment she saw, or thought she saw, a woman's face, an aged pale, haggard face, pressed against one of the upstairs windows, looking down at them. Although it was quite distant, she saw every hostile feature as this woman appeared, to her, to glare with malevolence at her. Natacha blinked and the face was gone.

“Where are you?” called the Count. “Do not be afraid, I say. Come this way!”

They followed him through a dense maze of low trees and shrubs along a barely discernible path until they were suddenly confronted by the face of a continuous, high, stone wall. “This is the boundary wall, built to keep the peasants out, although some say it was to keep the lascivious nobles in. And here is the secret.”

To their surprise he revealed a small door set at an angle in a concealed niche in the wall as it snaked past an ancient tree. “Would you have thought this was there?” he asked with triumph.

“You can barely see it,” said Natacha. “I had no idea, and I would have thought we could have wandered past it a dozen times and not found it even had we been looking for it!”

“It was hidden here by my ancestors to allow them to slip in and out of the grounds without anyone knowing. I expect it could tell a few tales if it could speak. I could tell you a few, but most of them are either indelicate or unsavoury. However, I find it a convenient shortcut. It is much quicker than walking along the drive and out the main gate. Voila!”

Natacha emerged from the garden in the shade of a large Cypress tree. It was several moments before she was able to fully take in her surroundings. “We appear to be in a churchyard,” she whispered to Miss Crotchet.

“What better place for a pious ancestor to emerge?” said the Count, taking her arm. “And who would query him on his return, entering the churchyard? Who, indeed, would be

bold enough to follow him if it were after dark? I could not have thought of a better place to have a concealed exit. In a way it was also appropriate as they are all buried here, in the crypt. It must have been a little sobering to have to slip past your ancestors, firm in the knowledge that they were watching you, as you made your way to and from your secret liaison.”

“Do you have secret liaisons, Count?” asked Natacha gaily and receiving a stern look from Miss Crotchet in return.

“I? Goodness, no! But I dare say that many of my ancestors did. They are all buried here in the crypt. And I must show you around the church. It is very old and most beautiful. Ah, there is Father Hinot! He always appears as if by magic when I am here. He seems to know instinctively. Let me introduce you.”

“I am not a Roman Catholic, you should know, Count,” said Natacha as they stood side by side before the small, bright, tabernacle. She did not know what compelled her to say it when she did. She thought of complementing her admission with the fact that her brother had married a Catholic, as if that made things easier. But, then, that might give the Count the wrong message, whatever message it was she was trying to convey. Oh, there was no doubt that the question was already shaping in the Count's mind just as other questions were now filling hers!

He seemed to understand her statement and simply nodded. “It must be strange to stand here,” she continued, “on this spot, and know that eventually you will be laid to rest here. It must be reassuring in a way as it is so tranquil, so peaceful. To be so close to one's own mortality! I have no idea where I will be buried. Death seems so remote, so distant. I sometimes feel that I am immortal!”

“Amen to that,” said the Count quietly. “Perhaps, in addition to the question I asked you yesterday, and at the risk of sounding morbid, I should also ask you whether you would be happy to be buried here?” he whispered. Natacha suddenly felt cold, shivered and glanced nervously behind her. The priest had followed then up the aisle and now stood, transferring beads from one hand to the other, softly muttering and blocking their exit. For moment she felt she was trapped, and Miss Crotchet was nowhere to be seen.

“It is all right,” said the Count softly. “I did not mean to alarm you. And Father Hinot neither speaks nor understands English.” He nodded towards the priest who bowed his head slightly, then retreated. “You will see, when we go out into the village streets, that the men will bow and remove their caps and the women will curtsy as we pass. You may find it a little strange, even unnerving at first, but it is customary.”

“I think I shall find it unnerving! I am permitted to smile back?”

“Of course. It is just a custom, a gesture or respect, largely meaningless now-a-days. My ancestors built the Chateau, the village, and this church. Almost all the people who lived in the village and the surrounding hamlets have depended upon my family for their living and daily bread for generations. We gave them work, homes, food and security. In return, they gave their labour, their loyalty and their respect and deferment. There was nothing tyrannical or despotic about it. It was not the stuff that revolutions are made of. In fact we had no trouble here at all during the Revolution. No seizures, no massacres. No-one went to the guillotine. Life just went on as it has for centuries and will, I hope, continue to do so providing the line is maintained. I do not encourage the deference and I certainly do not demand it. But, then, neither would I discourage it. It is simply part of local life.”

They paused in the church porch. “Here,” he said. “Dip your finger in the holy water and cross yourself, like this.” Natacha followed his example and felt a serene calm come over her. “It will protect your immortal soul,” he said glancing at the priest who was nodding his approval. “The water is blessed, and so are you.” Then they were out in the sunshine and the parasol was raised once again.

Natacha's concentration was sadly lacking when, later that afternoon, she came to sit at the Blunther and addressed the keyboard, a point that Miss Crotchet made several times. The notes were right. Her hands moved and her fingers fell in the right places. All of that would have happened automatically, without thought. Her fingers knew where to go and did

so dutifully. It was just that her heart was directed elsewhere and not at endorsing the pieces with the feeling that Miss Crotchet felt they deserved.

Her mind was in a turmoil. They had left the church and descended a narrow, sun-bathed, street between white painted buildings. The Count greeted everyone by their Christian names, asking them how their families were, enquiring after ailments, pets, work and their well-being. She stood at his side, listening, understanding much of what was said, contributing, smiling, catching the knowing glances of the young girls and the inquisitive looks of the men, laughing when the Count laughed, and feeling flattered. Yet she did not feel out of place and felt that the villagers she met accepted her and looked upon her as occupying her proper place, at this man's side. Natacha found the deference slightly distasteful but it also appealed to her vanity. Most of all she was touched by the simple, guileless, friendship of the people and by their demonstrable liking, almost reverence, for their undoubted benefactor.

"You see?" he said as soon as they were alone in the churchyard. "They are good, simple, folk. Some are almost like children when they bring their problems or petitions to me. They clearly love you already. Could you bring yourself to love them?"

"Exactly what are you asking of me, Count?" she said slowly.

"I would have thought that was obvious," he said. "I am asking you to marry me."

Natacha thought of the pale face that had looked down on her from a Chateau window. She found it hard to picture now, the expression, but it had not been one of approval. "And what does your mother think about this?"

"Ah, my mother. I must confess that no English woman, no matter which family she came from, would come up to my mother's ideals of her daughter-in-law. She would have to come from nothing other than the very best of French aristocracy. If I were to listen to my mother, either I would end up marrying entirely the wrong woman and spend my time despoiling showgirls, or I would have no legitimate heir. I cannot pretend that there is no hostility there, but I would appeal to you to be tolerant. She is an old, prejudiced, woman. I have to honour her, and no more. You need not worry about her."

"No, no! A rallentando," cried Miss Crotchet.

"I am sorry," said Natacha softly and retreated ten bars.

What should she do? She had not answered the Count. Here she was, hundreds of miles from home, in a foreign country, asked to respond to a proposal of marriage from a French nobleman whom she had known only a handful of days. Of course she would have to say "no". Her head told her that! It was too soon, too quick and precipitant! Yet he had presented her with a picture of a life that she found seductively attractive. The house, the gardens, the position, all of this she found more than desirable. Who would not? Beside all this, her family, her career, even Mark, appeared almost insignificant and second rate. Her greatest fear was what the Count's reaction might be if she did say "no".

Natacha hoped that the Count's mother would come down to dinner that evening but the place, although laid, remained empty. She suggested that perhaps she could be allowed up to meet her, but the Count thought there was plenty of time for that. Natacha was not happy with this answer. Even if she was going to say "no", she had an overwhelming desire to conquer all opposition to her acceptance. She was convinced that she had but to meet this woman and she would win her over to her cause. But to what end?

"I have been thinking," said the Count as they rose from the table. "I am not happy with the two of you staying up at the chalet. It is a desolate and remote place with no comforts, devoid of all modern facilities. It is not right that two women should be living there alone, and it is certainly un-chivalrous of me to permit it on my land. I think that you should accept my invitation to join me here at the Chateau. In fact there is no need whatsoever for you to return to the chalet. I can send for all your belongings right now and have them brought here straight away. I have already instructed two of the guest rooms to be prepared for you. Will you do me the honour of accepting my invitation?"

Natacha was taken completely unawares. She should have foreseen this, but she had not. "Us?" she said. "Come to stay here?" She looked to Miss Crotchet for guidance but could

see that her teacher, still peeved by, and constantly complaining about, Jacques, would leap at the opportunity if the answer was left to her. "It is a very kind and thoughtful offer," Natacha said, "but it is not one that we could properly accept under the circumstances."

Now she was in a minority of one. Miss Crotchet looked cross, and the Count looked surprised and disappointed. Clearly he had expected her to accept this, if no other, of his offers. "I am sorry," he said. "Is there nothing I can say to persuade you to change your mind and reconsider my offer?"

"No," said Natacha slowly, feeling sorry and alarmed although she did not understand why.

"I am sorry," he repeated. "Clearly I have played my cards in the wrong order. Do please forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," she said, brightening.

"And you will come to see me tomorrow?" he said, taking her hand and pressing it to his lips.

"Will I meet your mother?"

"I suppose that is possible."

"And have you any more wonders to show me?"

"Wonders?" he laughed. "You are the wonder! Well, maybe, maybe not. I could always show you the dungeons."

"Dungeons? Is there a torture chamber?"

"Regrettably, yes," he said nodding. "It is almost like a museum down there. When I was a boy it seemed a fine place to play, but now I rarely go down there. But for you, I would go anywhere."

"Oh, I would like to see them," she said brightly. Still he held her hand.

"I feel that I should not let you go tonight. I have this feeling that if I do I shall lose you forever. Please, will you reconsider and stay here as my guests? It is not too late!"

"No," Natacha said shaking her head. "We cannot."

"And there is nothing I can say or do that would persuade you?"

"Nothing. Oh! This is all too soon, too sudden!" she exclaimed.

I am sorry but you are staying here only two weeks. Then you will be leaving and returning to England. You have given me so little time in which to help you get to know me and what life here would be like. I am a desperate man."

"Would I be a Countess?" she asked, pausing at the door of the car.

"A Countess? Of course!"

"Natacha, Countess de - ."

"Natacha, Countess de Manienne."

"I think that I like the sound of that," she said climbing in. "I think I do!"

The Count leant on the window of the car. "You are not just teasing me?" he said.

"No, Count, I am not," she said seriously. "I find everything here very attractive. I find it very difficult to make up my mind. I do need time, more time."

"So your answer to my question earlier today, outside the church, it was not a "no", then?"

"No," she said. "It was not."

"Your playing today, it was most careless," scolded Miss Crotchet. "I know that there are distractions but you must learn to shut them out. You cannot carry your troubles into the concert 'all with you. They must be left outside."

"It is difficult," said Natacha wearily. She sat down at the table in the living room and watched Miss Crotchet flutter around with the lamps. "What do you think I should do? Is this all real or am I imagining it? Is he genuine? What would you do if a Count asked you to marry him?"

"I start by saying that no Count would wish to marry me!"

"But if one did? What then? How would you feel?"

Miss Crotchet stopped and looked at her. "No man 'as ever proposed marriage to me. I suppose if one did, whether 'e was a Count or not, I would feel 'onoured, flattered, and

tempted. Then I would ask myself, why me? And I would wonder if I could really risk the whole of the remainder of my life on the experience of a couple of days. That is assuming I could disregard the feelings of the loved ones I might 'ave left behind at 'ome."

"People do agree to get married after knowing each other only a couple of days. He appears willing to do so."

"But is it for the good? Relationships 'ave to be allowed to develop, grow, mature. And love is a tender plant. No-one knows if it will grow. Do you love him? It will be all too late once you are married if you do not."

"I suppose you are right," said Natacha sadly. "This is all a fantasy, and I must come back to reality."

"Me? Right? Me, who 'as never 'ad a man so much as look at her, leave alone propose?"

"I am sure that is not true, Miss Crotchet," said Natacha sternly.

"Ah, there was a young man once. But 'e went to the War with his friends. I stood at the side of the road, in the crowd, and waved goodbye to 'im with my 'ankerchief. I never saw 'im again. None of them came back."

"I am sorry," said Natacha. "I did not mean - ."

"It was a long time ago, ma chere, a long time. It is almost forgotten. Do not trouble your 'eart with it. I do not trouble mine. Now I will make us some drinks. How would you like that?"

Left alone, Natacha looked around the room for inspiration and settled her gaze on the Broadwood. Almost cautiously she stood and approached it. She sat at the keyboard and studied the sheet of music before her. It was an original manuscript. It had to be one of the rare, unpublished, works the Count had mentioned. He had placed it there for her to play! The notes were small, irregular, and indistinct, so she collected a lamp from the table and placed in on the piano lid. She started to play and was immediately convinced the piece was by Mendelssohn. As the music filled the room she wondered if this was the first time it had been played for, perhaps, a hundred years. She stopped and opened the shutter. She would let the music out. It could drift down to the valley. Perhaps he would hear it.

"What is that you are playing?" called Miss Crotchet from the kitchen. "I do not recognise it."

"I do not know for certain," Natacha replied. "I think it may be by Mendelssohn, or even his sister. It is an original manuscript. The Count must have left it here for me. The trouble is the light is not good enough to see all the notes clearly." As she said this, her eyes still fixed on the manuscript, Natacha reached out for the lamp, gripping the glass. Suddenly, before she could react or call out, her hands were burning and pain was shooting up her arms. Then there was a crash and a sheet of flame rose up before her, into which she seemed to fall and was engulfed.

Natacha opened her eyes. She was in a dark, gloomy room, filled with dark, acrid, smoke. Above her, draped with dust laden cobwebs, was a stone ceiling. When she turned her head she could see bare stone walls near the top of which were a number of openings which emitted a feeble light. She could not move her limbs and gradually, as her consciousness returned, she realised she was lying on a table of some kind. Her feet and wrists appeared to be fastened and there was a thick, tight, strap across her waist. She tried to lift her head and look around. Before her, set in a distant wall, was a high grill through which she could see daylight, and below which she could just distinguish a flight of steps. Nearer stood a bright, glowing, brazier in which a number of irons were red and ready. And now her eyes were adjusting to the light, she could make out other indistinct objects in the room and shackles and chains on the walls. There was no doubt of it. She was at the Chateau and in one of the dungeons.

Then, out of a dark, deep, corner, where she had been crouching, invisible, staggered an old, black clad, woman, shuffling towards her, brandishing a huge pair of forceps. "So you are awake, then, are you, my dear? And aren't you a beauty, eh? With your looks and your eyes, with your playing and your mouth, and those words, aren't you proud of yourself? Well,

then," she cackled, "do you know what these are? Do you know what they are for?" Natacha tried to reply or call out but her throat was dry and tight and no sound emerged.

"You don't, do you? They can be used for a lot of unpleasant things, but I use them to extract nails," continued the hag. "Finger and toe nails. You might think that the mediaeval craftsmen made them large and clumsy because they lacked the skills to make them small and delicate, like the instruments of today. You would be hopelessly wrong. They made them large and clumsy so that they would strike terror into the hearts of the victims. They are most effective, as I will shortly demonstrate. Terror, Mademoiselle! Do you feel terror? Do you feel it numbing your limbs and crushing your heart? Do you feel the tightness in your chest or the slackness in your bowels? Why terror? I can torture you to death only once, but I can keep you in a state of mortal terror for days and days, until you are prepared to say or do anything I demand. Anything, Mademoiselle! Look at them! Can you imagine them as they pull your toe nails out by the root? Can you not picture your finger nails being extracted one by one? Oh, they are so large that sometimes a toe or finger may be severed by mistake. These things happen. Do you feel the terror? Do you?"

Natacha struggled and tried again to call out. She pleaded with her eyes, to no avail. "What have you done to my son?" cried the woman menacingly "What have you done to him? I will tell you what you have done to him. You have bewitched him. You have bedevilled him, placed him under your spell. And do you know what we do to witches around these parts? What we have done to witches since the days of the Inquisition? You can still reduce your suffering by confessing your crime. Confess now!" she shrieked, waving the forceps in Natacha's face. "Confess now that you are a witch!"

Natacha shook her head and moaned her denial. She tried to move her arms but the fastening at her wrists held firm. Then, from somewhere distant and out of her vision, she heard the sound of a door creaking open, echoing down the cavernous room. It was enough to distract her torturer who suddenly hurried away and started to converse with whoever it was who had entered. Natacha strained and tried to see but could make out no more than a dim shape near the bottom of the steps.

"How is she, mother?" she heard a man ask. Her heart leapt. It was the Count's voice, no doubt of that. "What have you done to her?"

"Nothing as yet," hissed the woman, "but this one is just like the rest. She is a witch and must confess her witchcraft."

"This one is different, mother, different to all the others," he said.

"Different? Nonsense! She is a witch like the rest and will only bear misshapen goblins as children. You have already permitted her to desecrate the church and bewitch the villagers. I cannot permit this wicked conduct to continue. Our souls are in danger. Now go and leave me to discharge my sacred duties!"

"Let me at least see her."

"See her? You fool! Oh, what can a mother do when she has such an imbecile for a son? She has no power over me but if she as much as sets her eyes upon your eyes she will take hold and you will be lost, forever! Go now and leave us alone!"

Natacha could hear him climbing the steps. Desperately she lifted her head and tried to attract his attention. If only he would look at her! Then he was gone and she could hear the woman shuffling about. A moment later and she was at her side brandishing a flaming torch. "The hands!" she cried. "It is the hands! That is how you bewitched him. It is the way that you move your hands! Well, Mademoiselle, I will deal with that! I will deal with that for ever!"

Natacha watched in morbid horror as the flame was thrust and held under one hand, then the other. She saw her flesh crinkle, shrink, turn brown, then black, then start to peel off and fall in lumps onto the floor. The pain was beyond imagination and she should have fainted but something seemed to be keeping her awake. Yet there were other forces at work on her body as if someone else was applying other implements at the same time. There was a growing numbness in her feet, spreading up her legs. Now it was in her arms, paralysing her, but also neutralising the pain.

"There is the proof if ever I needed it!" screamed the woman. "Only witches can

suppress pain, the kind of pain that would send ordinary God-fearing mortals into paroxysms. You, Mademoiselle, have not cried out at all! You are a witch, beyond doubt you are!”

The numbness and paralysis were spreading even further. Now she could not even wriggle and she was having trouble breathing. Now she was beginning to feel drowsy. She fought against it. There was no saying what the woman might do if she fell asleep. If she now closed her eyes she might never open them again. But she was tired, so tired and somewhere distant but distinct she thought she could hear a soothing voice, invoking her to relax and rest.

“You are trying to escape,” shrieked the woman. “I will not have it, Mademoiselle. I cannot allow you to escape. Wake up! Wake up!”

But as inevitable as that which follows day, a long night had come.

Natacha opened her eyes and allowed the room to slowly come into focus. It was bright, lightly decorated in white and a pastel tint of a creamish-brown. High above her stretched a cream ceiling at the centre of which, directly above her head, hung an ornate light fitting. To her left was a pair of louvered doors through which she could see a balcony and, beyond, the tops of trees and the mountains. When she tilted her head to the right she saw a young girl, dressed in white, methodically reading a school book. “Where am I?” she asked. The angel dropped the book, leapt to her feet, and fled from the room. Natacha could hear her voice outside, echoing, as she called, “Mama! Mama, la belle n'est pas morte! Elle s'arise!”

Then she could hear steps, shoes clattering across stone floors, boots thundering up stairs, a clamour of voices. But no-one seemed to come. No-one reached her and saved her before her eyes closed and her brief day had run its course.

When next she opened her eyes she realised she was still in the same room, but the louvered doors were closed and the light was low and subdued. It seemed to be coming from a single source somewhere out of sight and throwing large, menacing, shadows on the walls. One of these moved and spoke softly. “Natacha? Are you awake? I have been so worried about you!”

She turned her head. It was the Count, sat and silhouetted by a single standard lamp. “Where am I?” she asked. “I feel so thirsty.”

“Here,” he said, holding a glass to her lips. “Sip this, but slowly. Just a little at a time. Not too much. You are at the Chateau. There was a dreadful accident. I blame myself for not having insisted that you came here as my guest. I can never forgive myself!”

“An accident?” she asked weakly. “What happened?”

“Later. I will tell you all about it later,” he said soothingly. “For the present you must rest. That was the doctor's instruction. And when you wake there will be someone here, twenty-four hours a day. There is always someone. Try now to sleep.”

“I seem to have been asleep for a long time,” she whispered. “Too long. And when I go there, there is something waiting for me, something bad, cruel, something vindictive, that will harm me.”

“You have been delirious. We were very concerned, very concerned indeed. Perhaps I should send for Doctor Berritone straight away? He could prescribe a draught to help you.”

“I am in the Chateau?” she whispered.

“Yes, safe in the Chateau.”

“Where in the Chateau?”

“In one of the guest rooms.”

“I have not been in one of the dungeons?”

“Goodness, no!”

“You would not allow me to be tortured?”

“I would not allow anyone to harm a hair on your head.”

“And you are going to sit there and guard me?”

“If you like,” he said, and leant forward to kiss her forehead. Natacha smiled, closed her eyes, and soon was asleep again.

She was there again, like a large black slug, crouching at the bedside. “You have not escaped me, Mademoiselle, even if you thought you had. No, it is of no use you thinking of calling out for him. He will not come and see you again. It is your hands. He has seen them, have you? You do not have to look. I can tell you. There is nothing left, no skin, no muscle or sinew, no bone. You will never again play the piano, Mademoiselle, never! The doctor has consulted his books and discussed your case with the most learned of physicians and they are all agreed. You will never play again. Your career is over, and so is his interest in you. He will not come. Never again. Forget him, Mademoiselle, forget him.” And she was gone.

The room was still, or again, in semi-darkness, she did not know which, when Natacha opened her eyes. Beside her, dressed in a dark red dress with a white diagonal sash, stood a young woman who she immediately recognised, head bowed, sobbing. “Do not weep for me,” murmured Natacha to her image. “Weep for all the other women.” Then she fell asleep again.

Still her tormentor pursued her. It did not seem to matter where she went, the woman was there, stooped, menacing, lying in wait. She was in the audience at Nice, at the unlit table in the chalet, sat in the back of the hired car as Miss Crotchet frantically tried to start it, pursuing her down the hill to the village, waiting for her at the door of the Chateau. She was posing in the sanctuary of Mark's studio. She was stalking her through the sun-drenched woodland at Newington. It did not matter what she did or which way she turned, the creature was always there, blocking the path, shepherding her, guiding her, propelling her, towards the precipice. And no-one came to her assistance. No-one seemed prepared to help her. Not Michael, nor Mark. Not even the Count who did no more than reassure her that he would not allow anyone to torture her. If this was not torture, what was?

At length she found herself lying on the hot sand of a white desert under a blazing sun. It was not easy to pull herself to her feet or struggle towards the distant mountains. Each step appeared more difficult and painful than the last, but she gradually saw that there was a gap between two sheer vertical faces of stone through which she could pass if only she could reach it. A white haired man sat in a deck chair and watched her as she approached. “Where is this?” she gasped. “Where does this lead to?”

“The very edge of the World,” the man said softly. “Beyond time and to the threshold of all existence. Step through and you step off.”

Suddenly something black and large was behind her. Natacha did no more than glimpse it, grotesque with out-stretched talons as it snarled and bared its teeth. Almost in panic, and because there seemed no other place to go, she leapt through the gap and fell, down, out, and into the infinite star light.